

Federigo's Falcon

Translated by Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella

Giovanni Boccaccio was an important figure during the Renaissance period. From about 1351 to 1353, he worked on The Decameron, which consisted of a hundred short tales and novellas. In the frame story, Boccaccio has seven young women and three young men flee from Florence to escape the plague. Read the following story about Federigo's falcon from the fifth day and answer the questions that follow.

There once was in Florence a young man named Federigo, the son of Messer Filippo Alberighi, renowned above all other men in Tuscany for his prowess in arms and for his courtliness. As often happens to most gentlemen, he fell in love with a lady named Monna Giovanna, in her day considered to be one of the most beautiful and one of the most charming women that ever there was in Florence; and in order to win her love, he participated in jousts and tournaments, organized and gave feasts, and spent his money without restraint; but she, no less virtuous than beautiful, cared little for these things done on her behalf, nor did she care for him who did them. Now, as Federigo was spending far beyond his means and was taking nothing in, as easily happens he lost his wealth and became poor, with nothing but his little farm to his name (from whose revenues he lived very meagerly) and one falcon which was among the best in the world.

More in love than ever, but knowing that he would never be able to live the way he wished to in the city, he went to live at Campi, where his farm was. There he passed his time hawking whenever he could, asked nothing of anyone, and endured his poverty patiently. Now, during the time that Federigo was reduced to dire need, it happened that the husband of Monna Giovanna fell ill, and realizing death was near, he made his last will: he was very rich, and he made his son, who was growing up, his heir, and, since he had loved Monna Giovanna very much, he made her his heir should his son die without a legitimate heir; and then he died.

③ Monna Giovanna was now a widow, and as is the custom among our women, she went to the country with her son to spend a year on one of her possessions very close by to Federigo's farm, and it happened that this young boy became friends with Federigo and began to enjoy birds and hunting dogs; and after he had seen Federigo's falcon fly many times, it pleased him so much that he very much wished it were his own, but he did not dare to ask for it, for he could see how dear it was to Federigo. And during this time, it happened that the young boy took ill, and his mother was much grieved, for he was her only child and she loved him enormously; she would spend the entire day by his side, never ceasing to comfort him, and often asking him if there was anything he desired, begging him to tell her what it might be, for if it were possible to obtain it, she would certainly do everything possible to get it. After the young boy had heard her make this offer many times, he said:

"Mother, if you can arrange for me to have Federigo's falcon, I think I would be well very soon."

When the lady heard this, she was taken aback for a moment, and she began to think what she should do. She knew that Federigo had loved her for a long while, in spite of the fact that he never received a single glance from her, and so, she said to herself:

"How can I send or go and ask for this falcon of his which is, as I have heard tell, the best that ever flew, and besides this, his only means of support? And how can I be so insensitive as to wish to take away from this gentleman the only pleasure which is left to him?"

And involved in these thoughts, knowing that she was certain to have the bird if she asked for it, but not knowing what to say to her son, she stood there without answering him. Finally the love she bore her son persuaded her that she should make him happy, and no matter what the consequences might be, she would not send for the bird, but rather go herself for it and bring it back to him; so she answered her son:

“My son, take comfort and think only of getting well, for I promise you that the first thing I shall do tomorrow morning is to go for it and bring it back to you.”

The child was so happy that he showed some improvement that very day. The following morning, the lady, accompanied by another woman, as if going for a stroll, went to Federigo’s modest house and asked for him. Since it was not the season for it, Federigo had not been hawking for some days and was in his orchard, attending to certain tasks; when he heard that Monna Giovanna was asking for him at the door, he was very surprised and happy to run there; as she saw him coming, she greeted him with feminine charm, and once Federigo had welcomed her courteously, she said:

“Greetings, Federigo!” Then she continued: “I have come to compensate you for the harm you have suffered on my account by loving me more than you needed to; and the compensation is this: I, along with this companion of mine, intend to dine with you—a simple meal—this very day.”

To this Federigo humbly replied: “Madonna, I never remember having suffered any harm because of you; on the contrary: so much good have I received from you that if ever I have been worth anything, it has been because of your merit and the love I bore for you; and your generous visit is certainly so dear to me that I would spend all over again that which I spent in the past; but you have come to a poor host.”

And having said this, he received her into his home humbly, and from there he led

her into the garden, and since he had no one there to keep her company, he said:

“My lady, since there is no one else, this good woman here, the wife of this workman, will keep you company while I go to set the table.”

⑭ Though he was very poor, Federigo, until now, had never before realized to what extent he had wasted his wealth; but this morning, the fact that he found nothing with which he could honor the lady for the love of whom he had once entertained countless men in the past gave him cause to reflect: in great anguish, he cursed himself and his fortune and, like a man beside himself, he started running here and there, but could find neither money nor a pawnable object. The hour was late and his desire to honor the gracious lady was great, but not wishing to turn for help to others (not even to his own workman), he set his eyes upon his good falcon, perched in a small room; and since he had nowhere else to turn, he took the bird, and finding it plump, he decided that it would be a worthy food for such a lady. So, without further thought, he wrung its neck and quickly gave it to his servant girl to pluck, prepare, and place on a spit to be roasted with care; and when he had set the table with the whitest of tablecloths (a few of which he still had left), he returned, with a cheerful face, to the lady in his garden, saying that the meal he was able to prepare for her was ready.

The lady and her companion rose, went to the table together with Federigo, who waited upon them with the greatest devotion, and they ate the good falcon without knowing what it was they were eating. And having left the table and spent some time in pleasant conversation, the lady thought it time now to say what she had come to say, and so she spoke these kind words to Federigo:

“Federigo, if you recall your past life and my virtue, which you perhaps mistook for harshness and cruelty, I do not doubt at all that you will be amazed by my presumption

“Take a husband, you may rest assured that I shall take no man but Federigo degli Alberighi.”

In answer to this, making fun of her, her brothers replied:

“You foolish woman, what are you saying? How can you want him; he hasn’t a penny to his name?”

To this she replied: “My brothers, I am well aware of what you say, but I would rather have a man who needs money than money that needs a man.”

25 Her brothers, seeing that she was determined and knowing Federigo to be of noble birth, no matter how poor he was, accepted her wishes and gave her in marriage to him with all her riches; when he found himself the husband of such a great lady, whom he had loved so much and who was so wealthy besides, he managed his financial affairs with more prudence than in the past and lived with her happily the rest of his days.

“Federigo’s Falcon” from *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio, translated by Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella. Translation copyright 1982 by Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella. Reprinted by permission of W.W. Norton & Co., Inc.

8. Which of the following *best* states the theme of “Federigo’s Falcon”?

- A A person’s true worth is best measured by the possessions he or she accumulates.
- B Money is not a true indicator of a person’s worth.
- C A person’s worth determines his or her fate.
- D Money can bring happiness to those who wait.

9. Who is the antagonist in this story?

- A Giovanna’s son
- B Federigo
- C the falcon
- D Giovanna

10. Monna Giovanna’s son stated that he would soon be well if he had which of the following?

- A a servant
- B a hunting dog
- C money
- D Federigo’s falcon

11. Why did Giovanna debate with herself before asking Federigo for the falcon?

- A She wanted her son’s wealth to come to her.
- B She did not want to be in debt to Federigo.
- C She felt guilty asking Federigo for his falcon.
- D She was still in mourning and should not visit with other men.

12. Why does Giovanna decide to marry Federigo?
- A He has good financial sense.
 - B Her brother wants her to marry Federigo.
 - C He saved her son's life.
 - D He is generous and honorable.
13. All of the following statements from the story describe the role of women in society in Renaissance Italy *except* which one?
- A "... but she, no less virtuous than beautiful, cared little for these things done on her behalf, nor did she care for him who did them."
 - B "I would prefer to remain a widow, if that would please you; but if you wish me to take a husband, ..."
 - C "... and he made his son, who was growing up, his heir, and, since he had loved Monna Giovanna very much, he made her his heir should his son die without a legitimate heir, ..."
 - D "The following morning, the lady, accompanied by another woman, as if going for a stroll, went to Federigo's modest house and asked for him."
14. Which of the following literary devices is present in this story?
- A onomatopoeia
 - B irony
 - C extended metaphor
 - D personification
15. Which paragraph contains the climax of the story?
- A 3
 - B 14
 - C 17
 - D 25
16. All of the following are examples of irony *except* which one?
- A Giovanna becomes a wealthy widow at the same time that Federigo is poorest.
 - B After ignoring him for so long, Giovanna learns that Federigo has the only thing that can save her son.
 - C Federigo, for all his poverty, still has white tablecloths.
 - D In his desire to please Giovanna, Federigo destroys the thing he most needs.

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17. The word "prowess," used to describe Federigo in paragraph 1, means which of the following?
- A forthrightness
 - B skill
 - C knowledge
 - D strength
18. If Ellie wanted to read more tales from *The Decameron*, what would be the **best** thing for her to do **first**?
- A go to the card catalog or library computer and look up Boccaccio
 - B read a history book about Renaissance Italy
 - C look up *The Decameron* in the encyclopedia
 - D skim through a collection of Italian short stories

“Federigo’s Falcon” Key

8. B

9. A

10. D

11. C

12. D

13. A

14. B

15. C

16. C

17. B

18. A